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International education policy transfer: borrowing both ways – the Hong Kong and England experience

Katherine Forestier and Michael Crossley

Abstract

This paper analyses how the impact of international student achievement studies and the recent economic crisis in Europe are influencing the development of educational policy transfer and borrowing, from East to West. This is contrasted with education reform movements in East Asia which have long legacies of borrowing from so-called ‘progressive’ discourses in the West. England and Hong Kong are used as case studies. Since 2010, England’s coalition government has prioritised its determination to look to jurisdictions like Hong Kong to inspire and justify reforms that emphasise traditional didactic approaches to teaching and learning. In contrast Hong Kong’s reforms have sought to implement practices related to less formal and pressured, more student-centred lifelong learning, without losing sight of strengths derived from its Confucian heritage culture. Conclusions highlight factors that underpin English interest in Hong Kong education policy, values and practice, and point to the need for further attention to be given to these multidirectional and often contradictory processes by researchers concerned with the study of policy transfer.

Key words: Policy borrowing and transfer; Hong Kong; England; education reform; international student assessment

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Introduction – the case of Hong Kong and England

In the era of western colonialism and economic dominance, education borrowing tended to flow from the so-called West to the East and South. Models were imposed or imported from colonial powers ensuring the flow of policies, practices and discourses relating to curricula and pedagogy were ‘uni-directional’, from the more developed West to the Rest (Rizvi, 2004, quoted in Nguyen *et al*, 2009; Yang, 2011), even if these flows were purposefully adapted to local needs.

However, the high levels of economic growth and educational achievement in East Asian countries and systems as measured by studies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), have prompted a passionate interest in some western countries to learn from East Asian societies that have scored well (Nguyen *et al*, 2009). In the wake of this phenomenon a trend of reverse borrowing, from East to West, is intensifying.

Stevenson and Stigler (1994) pioneered this interest when they called for Americans to learn from the strengths they had observed in their study of Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese approaches to education while interest among British policymakers dates to the Ofsted-commissioned study by David Reynolds and Shaun Farrell of primary school effectiveness in East Asian countries that had excelled in the IEA studies (Reynolds and Farrell,

1996). That interest has escalated with the growth of the PISA studies over the last decade and the strong performance of East Asian systems, to the point that this has become a key influence on policy decisions elsewhere, notably in England¹ under the Conservative-led coalition government that came to power in 2010.

Research methodology

This article draws upon the application of theoretical and conceptual work on educational policy transfer and borrowing. The analysis is largely informed by involvement of the first author in the interface between the UK and Hong Kong. From 2007 to 2012 she was employed by the British Council as Director of Education in Hong Kong and in this role was directly involved in facilitating meetings for UK politicians visiting Hong Kong who sought to explore the sources of its success. This first hand engagement was supplemented by an analysis of contemporary policy documents in both jurisdictions, related debates in the media, and the analysis of cultural and contextual differences.

The emergence of borrowing both ways

The Hong Kong context is one of the most revealing where two-way borrowing has occurred. In early colonial times Hong Kong's educational system was modelled on that of England and key reforms were initiated by reports and reviews of visitors from England. From around the late 1960s

¹ The Devolved Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own education policies and systems that diverge from that of England

Hong Kong became more autochthonous but the basic features of both the structure and curriculum remained unchanged. Under the One Country Two Systems model underpinning the Basic Law, its mini-constitution from 1997, Hong Kong has a high degree of autonomy from the rest of China and education policy is wholly under its control. This autonomy has given it a licence to retain features of its education system ‘borrowed’ from the United Kingdom, the former colonial power, as well as to innovate through a radical programme of education reform. The latter has involved a new wave of international borrowing or transfer, some with input from the United Kingdom.

Hong Kong’s high performance in studies such as PISA, along with its rapid economic growth, has fuelled international interest in its policies and practices. This has coincided with a period of economic realignment and challenge for the West following the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008. The West’s economic woes have added urgency to the interest in perceived high-performing education systems in international assessments, such as those of Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai and Taiwan. President Barack Obama’s nervousness that nations that ‘out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow’, (BBC News article, 9 May, 2012) is a sentiment shared by policymakers in England (Gove, 2011). It is ironic that the UK government has become so eager to emulate its former colonies, Hong Kong and Singapore, which it has done in addition to intermittent referencing of Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden. The East Asian systems are described as ‘restless improvers’ and ‘top performers’ in policy discourse in England, including in the 2010 *Case for Change* accompanying the 2010

White Paper (Department for Education, 2010), and in speeches and media articles (Gove, 2010a and b, 2011, 2012), culminating in the revised National Curriculum published in July 2013 (Gove, 2013b). The UK Secretary of State for Education told the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education: ‘I have been to Singapore and Hong Kong, and what is striking is that many of the lessons that apply there are lessons that we can apply here’ (Gove, 2010a).

In unveiling the revised National Curriculum, he again cited Hong Kong as a model and one of ‘the world’s most successful school systems’ (Gove, 2013b). He justified borrowing from such models by saying: ‘No national curriculum can be modernised without paying close attention to what's been happening in education internationally’ (*ibid*).

He explained: ‘I want my children, who are in primary school at the moment, to have the sort of curriculum that children in other countries have, which are doing better than our own.’ Only if they received an education ‘as rigorous as any country’s’ could they compete for college places and jobs with ‘folk from across the globe’ (*The Guardian*, 8 July 2013). Underlying these statements is a clear assumption that high levels of pupil achievement are a function of the nature of the curriculum.

Mr Gove has repeatedly turned to PISA studies, and the McKinsey reports on high performing systems, to inform and justify his reform agenda, having also highlighted what he argued to be England’s deteriorating PISA performance since 2000 (Gove, 2010a, 2011). Indeed, he told the World Education Forum in January 2011:

‘No nation that is serious about ensuring its children enjoy an education that equips them to compete fairly with students from other countries can afford to ignore the

PISA and McKinsey studies. Doing so would be as foolish as dismissing what control trials tell us in medicine. It means flying in the face of the best evidence we have of what works....our recently published schools White Paper was deliberately designed to bring together – indeed, to shamelessly plunder from – policies that have worked in other high-performing nations’ (Gove, 2011).

Following the release of the 2012 PISA results, the Secretary of State again referenced the systems that topped the league table in order to justify his reforms. This included Hong Kong, which was positioned in the overall league as second in science and reading literacy, and third in mathematics, after Shanghai and Singapore (OECD, 2013). He argued that:

‘For all the well-intentioned efforts of past governments, we are still falling further behind the best-performing school systems in the world...In Shanghai and Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong – indeed even in Taiwan and Vietnam – children are learning more and performing better with every year that passes, leaving our children behind in the global race.

‘There is a strong correlation in these league tables between freedom for heads and improved results...That is why we have dramatically increased the number of academies and free schools, and given heads more control over teacher training, continuous professional development and the improvement of under-performing schools’ (Michael Gove, quoted in *The Guardian*, December 3, 2013)

The message is clear: if rigour is restored to the National Curriculum and public examinations, if principals have high levels of autonomy, and if teachers can teach like those in Hong Kong and other high performing jurisdictions; ,England’s children can achieve similar academic success, regardless of social background. And ultimately, this will contribute to future economic success (DfE, 2012; Gove, 2013b).

Yet in Hong Kong, policymakers' explanations of its own high ranking and improved mean scores centred on its reform advocating progressive approaches to teaching and learning, including 'learning to learn, rather than traditional textbook-based teaching', 'project work and exploratory activities' in mathematics, a new science curriculum which 'emphasises scientific literacy and generic skills (e.g. critical thinking and problem-solving skills)', and 'reading to learn' for reading literacy (EDB, 2013b).

The Hong Kong media, however, was lukewarm in its response to the 2012 rankings. Coverage in the *South China Morning Post (SCMP)* focused on the deficits:

'compared with their counterparts in Singapore - second in maths, and third in science and reading - Hong Kong pupils improved less, gaining only 11 points more in reading and six in maths and in science from the 2009 assessment. . . The assessments also showed that just 12 per cent of pupils in Hong Kong were top achievers in maths, well below the 30.8 per cent for Shanghai and 19 per cent in Singapore' (*SCMP*, December 4, 2013)

Other articles questioned the results and their relevance, with headlines 'Grades and scores are not everything' (*SCMP*, December 4, 2013), 'Pisa 'politics' of no concern to parents' (*SCMP*, December 10, 2013) and 'Are Chinese students smarter or is testing system rigged in their favour?' (*SCMP*, December 18, 2013).

The director of the Centre for International Student Assessment in Hong Kong stated: 'We need to work on how to nurture more bright students, as our exam-orientated system tends to focus on high achievers' performance in exams but does not help them learn more than that.' (*SCMP*, December 4, 2013).

The Hong Kong PISA Centre issued a measured press release to explain the results, including the more nuanced findings from the test data and accompanying

surveys. While it noted that ‘Hong Kong 15-year-old students again stand in the top tier among 65 countries and regions’, differences between students of different socio-economic backgrounds remained unchanged and there were greater within-school differences than in the previous PISA study. Meanwhile, students’ ‘self-efficacy and self-concepts’ in mathematics remained below the OECD average (CUHK, 2013).

The lukewarm reception to the 2012 PISA results in Hong Kong reinforces questions as to whether its education system really is as good as it is understood in England; what lies behind its high position in the overall ranking, both inside and outside the classroom; and what are the Western motives in looking to systems such as Hong Kong? These are issues that are pursued in this article.

Before looking at the rise of international tests and an analysis of the Hong Kong and English experience, it is first helpful to revisit the research on education policy borrowing and transfer.

Education policy borrowing revisited

Among the longstanding purposes of comparative education is ‘learning from others’, in an attempt to understand and improve the home system, and counter provincialism and ethnocentrism (Crossley and Watson, 2003). But this comes with an important caveat. Many comparativists have warned of the dangers of simplistic borrowing and uncritical international transfer that fails to appreciate the need for sensitivity towards local contexts and which in turn results in implementation problems and policy failure (Bray and Thomas, 1996; Crossley and Watson, 2003, Steiner-Khamsi, 2010).

Some academics employed as investigators for PISA and TIMSS are cautious about how their results are used. During Hong Kong-UK policy

dialogue organised by the first author of this article, Frederick Leung, who leads the TIMSS study in Hong Kong, echoed the warning of Michael Sadler. In doing so, he stated that the ‘simple transplant of policies and practices from high to low achieving countries won’t work. One cannot transplant the practice without regard to the cultural differences’ (Leung, 2012).

Yet numerous education policies, practices and ideas have been transported across borders (Alexander, 2001; Beech, 2009). As Alexander states:

‘Cultural borrowing happens; it has always happened. Few countries remain hermetically sealed in the development of their educational systems, and for centuries there has been a lively international traffic in educational ideas and practices’ (Alexander, 2001 p. 508).

Moreover, the speed of transfer appears to be increasing as part of the process of globalisation. A more nuanced understanding of borrowing is emerging as a result, with transfer becoming more fractured through the multiple agencies and levels involved, across nations and systems (Rappleye *et al*, 2011).

There is also increased understanding that at the policy level the motivation to borrow will almost certainly be intimately associated with domestic political agendas (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010; Morris, 2012; Rappleye, 2012). As such it may be used as part of the political production to generate public concern and legitimate reforms that may be traced at least as much to deeply-held ideological positions as to any real intention to import models from elsewhere.

This literature also includes analyses of the processes of policy borrowing and Phillips and Ochs (2003) may be of particular use in analysing the two-way flow of borrowing between England and Hong Kong. They offer a four-stage dialectical model for understanding the complexity of borrowing. This focuses attention upon 1. the motivation behind cross-national attraction; 2. the decision to borrow; 3. the implementation process; and 4. its internalisation and indigenisation.

The rise of international tests: help or hindrance?

Because performance in international tests is being used so readily to inform or justify policy decisions in England, we need to consider the validity of such evidence.

Braun (2009); Ho, (2010) and Leung (2012) argue that if robust in their methodology and interpreted with caution, international surveys and tests can provide policymakers and civil society with key information about the relative success of their education systems and, through subsequent analysis, may help to inform improvements.

However, taking PISA as an example, their validity for comparing and ranking systems has been questioned, as has their use in shaping policy decisions. The focus on maths, science and reading literacy to measure the outcomes of education is, for example, contested for ignoring important skills such as creativity, bilingualism and critical thinking gained from studying arts and humanities subjects (Bulle, 2011; Zhang, 2011). Sampling for comparisons in one cycle and over time and place may not be reliable because

of variations in test content and format, student motivation to take tests, timing of the test, and variations in participating countries (Jerrim, 2011).

Indeed, the OECD itself advises caution in how results and trends are interpreted (OECD, 2010) and there is often a marked contrast in how the OECD explains the results and how they are interpreted in various countries, especially by the media and politicians. Technical issues relating to sampling have also resulted in several countries, including England, being excluded from its analysis of trends in reading performance between 2000 to 2009. These factors, and comparisons with England's improving TIMSS results, raise doubts as to whether PISA results can be relied on as evidence that standards in England have declined (Jerrim, 2011), or that Hong Kong's system is better.

Questions about the value of the data can be linked to how it is used to shape policy decisions (Meyer and Benavot, 2013). Policy discourse from England contains little critical analysis, whilst headline data has been used as ammunition to condemn the previous government's management of education and justify preferred reforms (Jerrim, 2011; Morris, 2012; Coffield, 2012; Auld and Morris, 2013). The influential McKinsey studies that use PISA data to identify high performing systems have similar shortcomings, by assuming causality between features and outcomes and ignoring evidence that may question and qualify achievements of systems such as Hong Kong (Braun, 2009; Morris, 2012; Auld and Morris, 2013). The Oates study of other curricula, used by the coalition government to inform the review of the National Curriculum (Oates, 2011), also lacks substantive contextual

evidence from the systems it looks to, despite acknowledging the pitfalls of borrowing that ignores context (Auld and Morris, 2013).

Some policymakers assume that success in international tests predominantly reflects the quality of formal schooling, which may not be the case. The role played by factors outside schools, including parental support and the impact of shadow education systems that drill students to perform well in examinations, is ignored in the current policy discourse. Indeed, Kwo and Bray (2011) argue that the shadow system in Hong Kong has extended and intensified over the last decade, contrary to policy intentions to reduce the prevalence of students being drilled for examinations (CDI *et al*, 2013).

If international league tables are to be used as a reference for educational policy transfer, we would argue that, at the very least, they need to be accompanied by other comparative evidence (Crossley, 2014). Of help are the multi-level analyses of the type described by Bray and Thomas (1995) and Alexander (2001), and a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the different education systems, their histories and contexts, as argued by Crossley and Watson (2003) and Jerrim (2011).

Analysing the Hong Kong and England cases

As argued above, the literature on education policy and transfer is helpful in comparing and analysing the Hong Kong and England cases. This should also include literature from Hong Kong itself. In the colonial period, Hong Kong can be seen to have developed a system with strong western characteristics in the structure of schooling. However, government had tended towards a hands-off approach (Morris *et al*, 2001; Lam, 2003). Local context involving a mix

of historical circumstances and cultural factors meant the system diverged from its English model, for example in its highly-competitive, exam-orientated nature and more didactic teaching practices influenced by Confucian-cultural traditions. This was despite attempts to borrow so called 'progressive' reforms that championed child-centred approaches to learning, such as the 'Activity Approach' and the Target Orientated Curriculum, which were introduced with minimal success to primary schools in the 1980s and 1990s (Morris *et al*, 1997; Lam, 2003).

The more holistic education reforms of the last decade represent a new phase of borrowing by Hong Kong, which looked both globally and locally for inspiration (Education Commission, September, 2000). Our analysis of this and other reform documents suggests that the system borrowed extensively from the international language of education, where terms such as 'key stages', 'key learning areas'; 'learning skills'; 'assessment for learning'; and 'lifelong learning' characterise the discourse adopted (*ibid*). Much of this language originally derived from Western approaches to constructing curricula.

The UK was a significant source of expertise for the post-1997 Hong Kong reforms, despite the fact that the New Academic Structure to be phased in from 2009 diverged from the previous model of preparation for examinations derived from British General Certificate of Education Ordinary and Advanced Level examinations. The new borrowing interest focused on improving the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and school accountability. It included school self-evaluation processes – borrowed largely from the Scottish model – and attempts to synchronise curriculum

and assessment development, including assessment for learning (Forestier, 2011).

We can now apply the Phillips and Ochs framework to the senior secondary reform in Hong Kong, with terminology used in the Four Stages Model italicised in our analysis. *Motivation for cross-national attraction* included political influences following the retrocession in 1997, the Asian economic crisis that began that year, pressures of globalisation, and corporate complaints that students were not equipped with appropriate skills and attitudes for the emerging knowledge economy; and the increasing dissatisfaction with schooling by parents, especially the rapidly growing middle class. The Education Commission explained the rationale, or *impulses*, for change:

‘The world is undergoing unprecedented changes, and Hong Kong is no exception. We are seeing substantial changes in the economic structure and the knowledge-based economy is here to stay. Hong Kong is also facing tremendous challenges posed by a globalised economy’ (Education Commission, September 2000, 3)

The *externalising potential* was drawn from a *guiding philosophy* and discourse derived from western education ideals that focused on lifelong learning, critical and creative thinking, and whole person development. This reflected the *goal* to create a system that improved student learning and equipped young people with skills for the 21st century workplace (Education Commission, September 2000; Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005²). The *strategy* involved reviewing the aims, structure, content and duration of

² The Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) was renamed as Education Bureau (EDB) on 1 July, 2007.

secondary education, taking note of overseas models. The *enabling structure* included new funding, and partnerships with cross-sector advisory groups, the latter including international input. The *process* involved curriculum and examination reform, the upgrading of teaching to a graduate-level profession and initiatives to create learning communities among teachers (CDI *et al*, 2013). *Techniques* to be borrowed with extensive and long term inputs from UK based academics included the linking of curriculum, assessment and school accountability, and varied pedagogical approaches to better cater for learner differences (interviews with Hong Kong policymakers and advisors, 2013).

The Hong Kong government's decision in 2005 to introduce the New Academic Structure (NAS) and New Senior Secondary Curriculum (NSSC) was justified by reference to pedagogical *theories* related to cognitive pluralism and student-centred lifelong learning (EMB, 2005). Creating a new structure (three years of junior secondary, three years of senior secondary and four years of university) and the new examination, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), were the *practical solutions*. The new structure was more closely aligned with the academic structure of mainland China and the HKDSE was modelled partially on the International Baccalaureate Diploma.

As *implementation* approached, the reforms attracted supporters and opponents. Wealthier parents resisted by removing their children from the system. Hong Kong student enrolment in UK independent schools jumped 21% in 2010 (Independent Schools Council, 2011). Increased demand from local families supported the expansion of the international school sector

(which did not use the local curriculum) from 31,000 to 49,183 places between 2001 and 2011 (EDB, 2013a).

Teachers resisted the new pedagogy involved in school-based assessment, resulting in its implementation being modified and postponed for many subjects (Berry and Adamson, 2012; CDC *et al*; 2013).

Universities, meanwhile, gave important support by adjusting admissions requirements and curricula. Common minimum entry requirements for students completing the HKDSE were agreed, and universities reviewed curricula to accommodate the extra year of undergraduate study (CDC *et al*, 2013).

For schools, curriculum content was adapted. The more vocational Applied Learning subjects, similar to England's Business, Technology and Education Council qualifications, were developed for less academic students, and implementation of the new curriculum was delayed a year to give more time for consultation and in-service training for teachers to deliver it.

By 2013, after the first students had completed the HKDSE, there were signs that the reforms, including their borrowed elements, were being *internalised* and *indigenised*. Whilst there was evidence students were studying a broader range of subjects with more enquiry-based learning (*ibid*), rote learning for exams, both in schools and through the 'shadow system' of after-school tutoring continued (interviews with teachers and parents, Kwo and Bray, 2013). In 2012, the Education Bureau launched a review of the NAS and NSSC and in 2013 modified some key ambitions, in particular in the further scaling back of school-based assessment.

The inevitable gap, as identified by Morris and Adamson (2010) in previous reforms, between what was intended in the new curriculum and what was being implemented in schools, was evident from the review. Inspectors were reported to have seen limited evidence of successful student-centred teaching and learning in some subjects, such as English Language, while excessive workload for teachers and students were found to be undermining the aim of the reform to improve the quality of student learning (CDC *et al*, 2013). Parents complained that there was still too much teaching to the test, and that school was too demanding and boring for their children (*Biz.hk: Journal of The American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, June 2013*).

Meanwhile, Hong Kong's international success in student assessments not only in subjects such as mathematics that it has traditionally done well in, but also in reading literacy, as well as citations by internationally-influential agencies such as the OECD and McKinsey that it was a leading example of a high performing education system (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010), has surprised many locals while also prompting reflection by policymakers and academics on both the improved learning outcomes from their 10-year reforms focused on learning to learn, and the strengths from Confucian heritage traditions that many argue should not be lost in the reform process (Cheung, 2012; Leung, 2012; EDB, 2013).

East to West borrowing

If we now turn to the English case, benchmarking against 'world-class standards', 'drawing on best practice everywhere' and building links between schools were part of the internationally oriented strategy of the Department

for Education and Skills during the years of Labour government following their election in 1997 (DfES, 2004). However, whilst ‘travelling reformers’ such as Michael Fullan were influential in shaping England’s education policy in this period, there is little evidence, after the Reynolds and Farrell study conducted under the previous Conservative government, of serious interest in importing policies and practices from so-called Confucian heritage cultures (CHCs) – a term coined by Watkins and Biggs (1996) to refer to countries with cultures and histories associated with China where Confucian traditions continued to have some influence. Successive Labour ministers of education visited Hong Kong, but experience gained by the first author in organising their visits between 2007 and 2009 indicated that they did not think they could, or should, import what amounted to Confucian heritage traditions as reflected in teaching and school cultures, and family and social values, although on his return from a visit to China in 2009 the then Schools Minister Jim Knight did suggest that studying Confucius might boost exam results in England (*The Guardian*, 29 February, 2009).

They appeared to understand arguments from Hong Kong-based academics that ‘out of school’ factors were important explanations for both the successes and shortcomings of Hong Kong education at the time. They were, however, interested in the education reforms in East Asia, with former Schools Minister Andrew Adonis noting that Hong Kong and other high-performing systems now discussed creativity almost as much as maths, and were focused on further improving their systems.

‘Study visits to schools in Singapore, Finland, Germany, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan have transformed my thinking on the scale of the task we face in England. All

these countries are improving their schools fast – all their schools, not just their elite schools’ (Adonis, 2012)

Interest in Hong Kong as a helpful model developed markedly from 2010, following the arrival of the Conservative-led coalition government determined to roll out a reform agenda that focused on ‘restoring’ academic rigour, giving parents greater choice of schools through the creation of more academies and free schools, and using competition to drive up standards (DfE, 2011b; Gove, 2012). Within months of the General Election, Michael Gove had visited Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China. In February 2012 the then Minister of State for Schools, Nick Gibb, visited Hong Kong to seek evidence for the review of the National Curriculum, particularly for mathematics. He argued in the policy dialogue in Hong Kong, after meeting pupils and teachers in a small number of schools, that ‘context could not be an excuse’ for not adopting practices that worked elsewhere. He saw in the teaching and learning culture in Hong Kong much of what he wanted for England:

‘What I notice in all the school visits is the seriousness of the classes and the attitude of the students. If you come to the weaker state schools in England you will see the extreme outcome of an approach to pedagogy that is based on creating happy children, and the opposite is the case. All I see in such classrooms is amateurism, a lack of professionalism, a lack of seriousness’. (*Nick Gibb, 2012, transcribed from policy dialogue*).

The Phillips and Ochs framework can now be applied to this interest from England. The *impulses for attraction* include political change after 13 years of Labour government and the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Negative

external evaluations – the United Kingdom’s perceived declining performance in the PISA study – and public dissatisfaction with the state system that prompted more affluent parents to opt for private alternatives, were other significant factors, along with poor economic performance.

It is especially interesting to analyse the *externalising potential*, or aspects of interest, that the Michael Gove-led DfE visit had in Hong Kong. It was not the current reforms in Hong Kong that emphasise student-centred learning, generic skills that promote creativity and independence, or a less ruthlessly competitive examination system. Nor was it the broader range of subjects at senior secondary level that included less academic options such as Health Management and Social Care, and Tourism and Hospitality Studies – the sorts of subjects criticised by Michael Gove in his championing of the English Baccalaureate.

Hong Kong policy has sought to reduce the quantity of knowledge-content in the curriculum, to phase in school-based assessment and phase out pass-fail measures in public examinations. Mr Gove, in contrast, proposed a more content-heavy curriculum for subjects such as English, mathematics and history; cancelled course work from the GCSE; and told the media that more pupils would fail the more rigorous examinations (*Daily Mail*, 22 February, 2012; Gove, 2013b). If Hong Kong has a better curriculum than England, as Mr Gove suggested, it might not in fact be one that he approves of. Indeed, Nick Gibb warned his Hong Kong hosts that the overall direction of their reforms would lead to a decline in ‘standards’.

Rather, it was largely the perception of the traditional, Confucian heritage features of Hong Kong education, pre-dating the current reforms,

that UK ministers may really have been interested in – in Phillips and Ochs’ terms, a *guiding philosophy* that emphasises success comes from hard work, discipline, respect and humility; that the *goal and ambition* should be high achievement to ensure social and economic status; that *strategies* for success include a more demanding curriculum and more rigorous examination system; *enabling structures* that involve a strong role for independent bodies such as churches in delivering education; *processes* such as regular testing and homework; and the dominant *techniques* of linking memorisation to understanding and using traditional whole-class, didactic approaches to teaching. In short, it can be argued the English policymakers were more interested in transferring broader educational values and practices associated with Hong Kong, rather than its policies *per se*.

The decision to transfer such values and practices linked to what were perceived to be the rigorous academic standards associated with the Hong Kong system involve elements of the *theoretical*; *realistic/practical*; ‘*quick fix*’ and ‘*phoney*’ solutions theorised by Phillips and Ochs (2003), as we illustrate in *Figure 1* below.

[Figure 1. Factors underpinning education reform in England: levels of decision-making using the Phillips and Ochs model]

At the implementation level, the reforms in England have been marked by an extraordinary degree of conflict with key stakeholders, especially the teaching profession, academia and local education authorities. This is reflected in statements in the media that ‘we are marching into the sound of gunfire’ (Gove, in *Daily Mail*, 22 February, 2012), against head

teachers ‘peddling the wrong sort of approaches to teaching’, and the subsequent condemnation of academics – caricatured as ‘the Blob’ – who criticised plans for the National Curriculum as ‘guilty men and women who have deprived a generation of the knowledge they need’ (Gove, 2013).

Several expert panel members for the revised primary National Curriculum withdrew from the exercise, with one describing the draft Programme of Study guides for maths, English and science as ‘fatally flawed’ because they overlooked the different learning needs of individual children (Pollard, 2012). The ‘crude’ approach to using international evidence was also criticised (*ibid*).

Significantly, among the academics who resigned from the panel was Professor Mary James who, as a member of Hong Kong’s Curriculum Development Council, has been an important influence from England on its curriculum and assessment reform.

Even Michael Barber, whose reports with McKinsey lauded the successes of education systems in East Asia, warned in a *Guardian* article that it would be a mistake for the English government, in reforming its examination system, to rely too heavily on systems in East Asia that have excelled in the basics such as mathematics (Barber, 2012). For systems like Hong Kong and Singapore ‘see that mastery of the basics, while essential, is not enough’, and that while England is looking East, these systems are looking West, and are reforming their systems to extend their capacity for creativity and innovation (*ibid*).

It is too early to assess the impact of England's current reforms in terms of their *internalisation and indigenisation*. Children reciting multiplication tables in the primary years may return as routine classroom practice according to wishes that Michael Gove expressed in the *Daily Mail*, 17 December 2011. The DfE has quoted evidence that the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) as a measure of performance in GCSE examinations is resulting in more students pursuing traditional academic subjects in their GCSE combinations (DfE, 2012). However, home-grown practices, for example those which stress flexibility in approaches, problem solving, and practical, hands-on experiences as detailed in the 2011 Ofsted report *Good Practice in Primary Mathematics: Evidence from 20 Successful Schools*, may be more influential in light of lessons from comparative education, given that they have evolved in the English context.

Finally, we can expect further *review* and change, with or without a change of political power before or after the Conservative-led coalition's term ends in 2015, due to political pressures and feedback from schools. Indeed, in the first half of 2013 the Government retreated on plans to replace the GCSE qualification. In the revised National Curriculum presented to Parliament in July 2013, Mr Gove back-tracked on some proposals, for example by modifying the much-criticised British-centric content of the History curriculum to include more world history (Gove, 2013b). However, children would still be expected to embark on fractions in Year One, and algebra by the age of 10 (*ibid*) – expectations gleaned from ministers' journeys to the East, in particular Hong Kong.

In the case of England's borrowing from Hong Kong, the primary focus of interest is at curriculum and pedagogical levels. The Phillips and Ochs model can be supplemented with the following depiction of two-way borrowing (*Figure 2*). This draws on the Adamson and Morris (2007) classification of curriculum ideologies and their components and in doing so it indicates, ironically, a pendulum effect – that England seeks to borrow the more traditional features of Hong Kong ideology and practices; whilst Hong Kong's reforms have sought to adopt key features of so-called progressive western education so criticised by the coalition government. Yet both have a common neo-liberal aim to enhance the competitiveness of young people, their skilled workforces and economies.

[Figure 2. Two-way Borrowing: The England-Hong Kong Case-study]

In what can be labelled as the transfer of ideologies in education, we can see that England's interest in Hong Kong centres more on ideology, learning culture, pedagogies and practices, rather than Hong Kong's current policies. Hong Kong as a reference may, in fact, be little more than a component in a 'pick 'n' mix' solution adopted to justify the UK government's neo-liberal ideology and policies favouring traditional standards, borrowed as much from the past and from favoured independent and grammar schools in England as from overseas (Morris, 2012; Wright, 2011). Moreover, Phillips and Ochs' model can help to explain what is happening and why, but not whether it can work. For that, we need to return to the type of multi-level analysis advocated by Alexander (2001), and to a deeper understanding of the Hong Kong context.

Understanding the Hong Kong context

Amongst Hong Kong researchers, practitioners and policymakers there is, arguably, a growing understanding of the importance of local context, culture and identity in shaping how education is delivered, and the reasons behind the system's success in international tests that long pre-dates the current reforms (Leung, 2012). Parental expectations, beliefs and pressures within the Confucian heritage culture, and the physiological link between learning Chinese characters and mathematics, are cited as examples of contextual factors that cannot be ignored, nor be readily transferred (*ibid*). Indeed, as reforms are internalised in Hong Kong, the cultural contexts – their strengths and limitations – appear to be well understood by policymakers (interviews with policymakers 2010–13). This is supported by the increasing body of research focused on understanding Confucian heritage cultural contexts in East Asia, the nature of the Chinese learner and teacher, and how changes in education – particularly at classroom level – can be implemented within these contexts (Watkins and Biggs *et al*, 1996 and 2001; Chan and Rao *et al*, 2009; Yang, 2011).

What is most interesting is how this literature echoes Alexander (2001) in seeking to move beyond simplistic dichotomies. From this, we can understand how Chinese learners and teachers ‘intertwine’ so-called traditional and progressive approaches, such as memorisation and understanding; the collaborative and competitive; and didactic and constructivist (Chan and Rao, 2009). The intertwining has also been linked to the ‘doctrine of the mean’ in Chinese culture, which facilitates a readiness to

reach accommodation and compromise (Tsui and Wong, 2009). Hayhoe (2005) has also noted the ability of Confucian-heritage cultures to absorb elements of other cultures, and integrate diverse thought while being sensitive to contextual differences, citing the work China's most prominent scholar of comparative education, Gu Mingyuan (2001).

This could be a key feature that assists borrowing in the Confucian heritage cultural context, accepting and even promoting the inevitability of adaptation and indigenisation, and ensuring these cultures are far from uniform and static.

What is missing to further inform the analysis of two-way borrowing between East and West is an extensive body of scholarship and education theory related to pedagogies from non-western sources, including from Confucian-heritage cultures, that could be of value to other systems (Yang, 2011; Cheung, 2012). As Leung and others noted in the 2012 policy dialogue, educational studies, and teacher education in Hong Kong, have traditionally focused on theories and practices originating in the West. This is an example of the 'mental colonialism' identified by Nguyen *et al* (2009), who argue that non-western post-colonial cultures now need to construct world views based on their own cultures and values.

The endorsement of success in international studies of student achievement has had the positive effect of enabling systems like Hong Kong to recognise their strengths and want to better understand them, however much they seek further improvement, as seen in the current Hong Kong reforms. Global interest in their successes, and their new place in the flow of international discourse, should also be welcomed. However, rather than

relying only on international tests, more research is needed to identify the specific strengths and limitations of Confucian-heritage pedagogy and its associated cultural values, as well as those of contemporary approaches to education reform in East Asia.

For example, in a speech held to report on the early outcomes of Hong Kong's new academic structure and senior secondary curriculum, James (2013), identified what she thought other systems, including England, could learn from contemporary Hong Kong education policymaking. This included policy processes that are 'driven by educational values and evidence, not politics', a 'refusal to dichotomise choices' but strive for balance, and a commitment to 'genuine and sustained consultation' (*ibid*). This contrasts with what James describes as ideologically driven reforms in England.

Conclusion

We have argued in this article how interest in East Asian policies, educational values and practices has increased in light of the strong performance of students in the region in international assessments, and as neo-liberal governments in the West search for solutions in education to bolster their future competitiveness. We have suggested that these solutions hark back to more traditional values and practices in East Asia that may also resonate with their advocates' own political beliefs and nostalgia for a more didactic approach to schooling, rather than interest in the most recent East Asian reform policies that draw on 'progressive' traditions from the West.

The Hong Kong case also demonstrates the benefits to be gained from sustained collaboration between policymakers, practitioners and researchers,

including some international input, which may be an approach to educational reform that England could have much to learn from.

In light of this, borrowing both ways between the East and West deserves further critical attention from researchers concerned with the study of educational policy transfer. Such work could lead to greater understanding of the nuances involved in the achievements of systems such as Hong Kong and help to better identify the policies and practices that may or may not be relevant for the West.

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